

Liquid Autist

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The metaphor of liquidity in business, economics, and finance has been trending hard in the years following the financial crisis. Think of the 'flows' of goods and capital, 'dried up' credit or even 'bailouts'. The Journal of Cultural Economy dedicated an entire issue to the analogy, claiming it as the central image of the global economy with which we must grapple and alter if we want to see positive change across international financial systems. But there is a crucial contradiction between this style of imagery and the reality it is supposed to describe. The actual liquid asset (as it exists as an object within the the global financial system) does not look like a liquid at all. Rather, it looks like an impossibly simple, self-contained unit within a system, both market and cultural, that assures its value to be universally understood as stable and regulated. More than any other innovation, it was the standardized shipping container's invention in the mid 20th century and the subsequent 'containerization' of global trade which allowed for the impossibly ornate, automated just-on-time supply chains we take for granted today.

The cube is the granular avatar of the global liquidity network — not a Getty image splash of mouthwash-colored fluid isolated on white.

The 1997 Vincenzo Natali movie, *Cube*, features the severely autistic Kazan, whose savant-like ability to quickly compute prime numbers in his head, allows him to eventually emerge as the only survivor of the cubic labyrinth. Boxes are frequently associated with autism both as metaphor for the 'disconnected and closed-in' feelings typical of autism and as the literal 'hug box' or 'hug machine': a therapeutic device for autistic people invented by Temple Grandin. The device, which constrains the user inside an adjustable padded enclosure is modeled on a similar apparatus used in slaughterhouses also invented by Grandin. In a notorious 2012 incident, an American teacher was fired for forcing an autistic student 'into his box' as a cruel disciplinary measure.

The (highly controversial) *Evolutionary Psychology* journal recently published the 'Solitary Forager' theory of autism, characterizing ancient autistic people as '...ecologically competent individuals that could have been adept at learning and implementing hunting and gathering skills in the ancestral environment.' Meanwhile, there seems to be a popular belief that the recent spike in autism rates (1 in 10000 in 1970, when it was defined vs. 1 in 50 in 2013) is some sort of emergent evolutionary defense mechanism against the cacophony of stimuli in hyper-networked society: rather than a disorder, autism is seen as some kind of superpower.

In many ways, the autistic has emerged in recent years as a kind of dark Weberian 'Ideal Type' for our age. Portrayed either as victims (of a global conspiracy of technocratic wonks vaccinating our children into dystopian inhuman nightmare babies or the tragic Hikikomori youth of Japan and World

of Warcraft-obsessed loners of suburbia who can only connect with the world via a vast network of machines); or as a new breed of hero (the Ron Paul acolyte, on the fringes of society but claiming to know how to cut through the illogical mess of contemporary politics and economics with glaringly simple, common-sense models of how the world should function; the Silicon Valley 'hacker', who despite lacking social skills redefines human relationships through the social media software he designs). As political actors, each of these types are strongly associated with American-style Libertarianism. Some have even called Libertarianism 'applied autism'.

Beneath that broad Libertarian heading, what ties each of these disparate types together (both the reactionary and active/creative) is a direct and strangely negotiated relationship between the abstract models and images with which these characters make sense of their highly networked world, and the world that they then see in front of them. In the case of the more powerful, heroic brand of Libertarian autistic type, there is a direct and even visible relationship between abstract models and the world he actively creates. We can identify this sort of libertarian map/territory mix-up in the private space industry, seasteading, Elon Musk's hyperloop proposal, the urban plans of emergence theorists, the trend of diagrammatic architecture, 'big data' modeling of critical mass, and tipping points in the assessment of the value of social media companies, all the way to the policy prescriptions of the libertarian Cato Institute's economic and political poetics of the self-driving car as the true 'coming-into-being' of American freedom. All of these together amount to the application of a sort of autistic logic to the shape of our near-future society.

In the anime series *Ghost in the Shell*, 'Autistic Mode' is a defense mechanism used by cybernetic soldiers to protect their minds from external harm by disconnecting completely from the ubiquitous mind-connected internet. Indeed, a user on the autism message board wrongplanet.net describes his belief that he is able to consciously enter and exit an 'Autistic Mode' at will: 'I have now achieved so much understanding of myself that I can now consciously "jump in and out" of autistic mode. In autistic mode I believe the thoughts in my head to be reality. There is a filter from the world as it is to my perception of the world.... In non-autistic mode there is no filter from the world as it is to my perception of the world. I'm in the world. The only truth is what I sense around me.'

::Engaging Autistic Mode::

Text by Nick Lalla and Daniel Keller